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# Acta community theatre's 'cycle of engagement' and foundation worker programme: creating pathways into cultural participation and work

Kerrie Schaefer , Aqeel Abdulla, Neil Beddow, Jody Cook, Hiba Elhindi, Ingrid Jones, Tracey Harvey, Kathryn Hopkins, Rosalie Pordes, Sara Snook and Helen Tomlin<sup>1</sup>

Drama, Exeter University, Exeter, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article expounds acta's model of participatory community theatre developed over the years since the organisation was founded in 1985. It examines how acta's commitment to access and participation has come to be enshrined in the 'cycle of engagement' which offers multiple pathways into and through participation in theatre making. Recently, these pathways into experiencing and making theatre have been extended into (paid) training and employment through the launch of the Foundation Worker (FW) programme. The article examines acta's Foundation Worker programme which offers first jobs with training and mentoring to those new to the community/participatory arts workforce, whether recent arts graduates, community theatre participants or civil society/third sector workers. It is argued that the co-articulation of the cycle of engagement and the Foundation Worker programme reflects acta's democratic and developmental ethos of theatre making. The aim of this piece is to contextualise acta's history and development as a community theatre company and to outline the pathways into employment and training that acta's FW programme offers. The paper is co-authored with acta and FWs (in third-person voice) after a focus group at the acta Centre, Bedminster, in July 2019, with follow up over email.

## KEYWORDS

Community theatre; cultural participation; creative work; artist development; cultural policy; arts funding

## Introduction

Acta community theatre company, based in Bedminster, Bristol, is an established UK arts organisation with some 35 years standing in producing accessible, and participatory theatre in the south-west of England. Central to the company's ethos is that:

theatre belongs to everyone, and everyone has a story to tell. Their voices are often not heard, so acta creates a place where everyone's story matters, where individual opinions and experiences count, and are valued by others (Acta 2012, 2).

Acta is an Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO; 2018–2022), with the NPO 'core grant' funding approximately one-fifth of the company's annual turnover. The remainder (majority) of acta's funding, supporting a varied programme of work run from the acta Centre in Bedminster, derives from diverse sources

**CONTACT** Kerrie Schaefer  [K.V.Schaefer@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:K.V.Schaefer@exeter.ac.uk)  Drama, Exeter University, Exeter, UK

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including UK and EU arts and cultural funding bodies and third sector/civil society trusts and foundations. The two-pronged focus of this article is on acta's history and development as a community-engaged theatre company and the establishment of the Foundation Worker (FW) programme, a paid employment programme offering first jobs with training and mentoring support in community theatre. Conceived in 2011 by the acta Senior Management Team (Neil Beddow and Helen Tomlin) and piloted in 2012 with acta participants, the FW scheme was introduced as a key strand of acta's core programme alongside the multi-layered system of participation in community theatre: the 'cycle of engagement' (see Acta 2012, 7–8). With the co-articulation of the 'cycle of engagement' and the FW programme, acta's community theatre programme connects cultural participation with work. The extension of pathways for participation in community theatre into paid training and employment is, according to Neil Beddow, driven by acta's underlying ethos: 'In the end, for acta, it always comes back to fairness, equality and ownership. Especially ownership' (Beddow, email correspondence).

Expounding acta's devised and developmental model of community theatre, evolved over three decades (see below), is necessary given the notoriously problematic key terms at play, namely 'community' and 'participation', and their intersecting practical, disciplinary and policy formations. The discourses of 'community' and 'participation' in the cultural field are complicated as they are shaped in relation to a set of tensions between, for instance, art and 'culture as ordinary' (Williams 1958), legitimate and illegitimate cultural forms (Bourdieu 1984), as well as in relation to government cultural policy's tripartite focus on economic efficiency, quasi-aesthetic judgement (standards of 'excellence') and access and participation. Participation, or attendance, now constitutes a measure of (non-) engagement in official forms of culture (see Miles and Sullivan 2012). The terms 'community' and 'participation' in this context are capacious, even ambiguous, to the point of easily becoming meaningless buzzwords.

Leaving aside the definition of community in terms of place/location, identity/interest or as projected (Mulligan et al. 2006) or phenomenological (inhering in relations between historical or archival bodies (Nicholson 2005)), Gay Hawkins has explored community as nostalgia, activism and as a policy/practical push for democratic cultural policy making. Community can, as Hawkins notes, mark a strategic concern within cultural (funding) policy for underrepresented or excluded constituencies, cutting across social differences such as class, race, ethnicity, age, sex/gender, religion, ability (1993, 22–23). While this construction of 'community' and 'participation' risks obscuring the struggle of those, such as artists/people of colour, with specific grievances concerning rights to be recognised within the aesthetic mainframe of British art and its institutions, and not just in terms of anthropological – collective/'folk' – definitions of culture (see Khan 1976; Araeen 2010; Daboo 2018), community theatre's broad recognition of the heterogeneity, and potential intersectionality, of excluded constituencies (and cultures) promotes an alternative recognition of cultural difference and pluralism in stark contrast to current policy concerns to ameliorate purported cultural lack via participation (the deficit model of participation, see Miles and Sullivan 2012; O'Brien 2014, 68). The Foundation Worker programme will be examined as an extension of a participatory community theatre practice that is concerned to ensure that its theatre workers reflect the diverse society it engages in promoting a more pluralistic public (funded) culture and civic society.

## Acta community theatre: the ongoing development of a participatory practice

We have always proposed that the people we work with are the experts in terms of their own life experience, and as imaginative creators – our expertise is to unleash and channel that, and to use our knowledge of theatre making to guide, shape, and mould the work of many imaginations into a coherent whole – so that people owned theatre, said what they wanted to say, in the words they wanted to use, to other people who would understand the language and the experiences they related. (Beddow, email correspondence)

Acta was established in 1985 as a theatre collective working across what was then the county of Avon (hence, Avon Community Theatre Agency).<sup>2</sup> In 1989, as government cultural policy transformed arts subsidy into investment boosting the role of business, local authority development trusts and charitable foundations in support of the arts, the theatre collective became a company with Neil Beddow as Artistic Director. According to Neil, there were several points of focus in the early years of acta as the company ‘support[ed] a network of youth theatres for young people in disadvantaged areas, projects with disabled people and large-scale community plays involving hundreds from specific areas’ (Beddow 2013, 96). As these wide-ranging areas of engagement suggest, acta’s community theatre practice drew on an amalgam of dynamic and evolving practical methodologies with an emphasis on collective improvisation and devising as pioneered in Youth Theatre and Theatre in Education (TiE): Beddow honed his craft in Bristol with Kids’ Youth Theatre and Bush Telegraph TiE. At the same time, a movement was growing around the Community Play, the most prominent mode of which was that developed by Ann Jellicoe (ex-literary manager of the Royal Court Theatre, London) in a Dorset town, although aligned projects had been taking place in urban, working class and cosmopolitan contexts inspired, not least, by the collective creation methods of community arts practitioners.

Kershaw’s *The Politics of Performance* (Kershaw 1992) outlines the development of the alternative/community theatre movement in the UK from the 1960s to the early 1990s. His work characterises the 1980s as a period of retrenchment and reorientation as practitioners improvised ways of making theatre in a predominantly conservative economic and ideological environment. He locates Ann Jellicoe’s Colway Theatre Trust (CTT) and Welfare State International (WSI) as theatre organisations at the forefront of navigating this (post-) political landscape, improvising subversive modes of performance (Jellicoe/CTT), in addition to more established oppositional practices, and establishing long-term collaborative engagements negotiating democratic modes of performance making and community development (WSI). Kershaw’s analysis of the alternative/community theatre movement ends in the early 1990s with the work of WSI forestalling the fragmentation of the movement, a question nevertheless posed by different notions of community emerging in the 1980s (community as locality in contrast to working-class solidarity under threat from economic restructuring). In *The Radical in Performance* (Kershaw 1999), Kershaw does not return to this question so much as attend to the challenge posed to community by postmodernism’s dismantling of the epistemological certainty of meta-narratives. By the new millennium, after the disintegrative effects of postmodernism on collective solidarity and critique of the exclusionary logic of community (see Young 1990), community theatre seemed antithetical to radical performance projects. In any case, the field in which

community theatre analysis flourished appeared to fall fallow to regenerate under the umbrella of Applied Drama/Theatre in the late 1990s/early 2000s.

Despite the apparent turn away from community theatre to other modes of (post-modern and other pre-emergent forms of) performance in the 1990s, community theatre practice and debate continued. There was, into the middle of the 1990s, an attempt to unpack some of the debates Kershaw seemed to have sewn up within the field of practice. David Jones' unpublished PhD in Arts Education (1996) captures some of this vital debate mapping a broad spectrum of practice from the Jellicoe/CTT community play, to the second iteration of CTT under Jon Oram, to Theatre in Education and community animation endeavours (at the Open Theatre and Belgrade Theatre, Coventry) to, finally, collective devising in community arts (represented by the still influential Telford Community Arts despite disbanding in 1989). Jones notes that theatre practitioners were straining to move beyond fixed notions of cultural value reified in concepts such as artistic expertise, authorial/directorship ownership of work, community authenticity and professional (middle class) standards. Class remained an important factor in this critical shift. While the Jellicoe/CTT model of the community plays re-centred professional practice and could, therefore, be seen as, as Neil states, an example of the extension of middle-class ownership of theatre (2019, email correspondence), more concerning was the return to a traditional notion of community (based on a presumption about idealised social relations in rural village life rather than a more productive notion of community as a dynamic process of conscientisation) and a 'loose' conception of participation as 'arts for all'. Jones argued that there was a more robust notion of the 'arts entitlement' enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27) in collaborative creative methods 'which ensure not only equality of access to, but popular control of, the cultural capital which is symbolised by community playmaking' (Jones 1996, 243). Neil states that the idea of devising, involving people's voices, words, using improvisation ... is what acta pioneered from the very beginning of our work ... – it being, of course, an approach ... with[in] youth theatre since the late 70's' (email correspondence). It is in this context of continuing practical development and debate that acta articulated a model of community theatre thus:

- (1) is primarily concerned with individual and community development
- (2) determines theme and content through community consultation
- (3) is devised then scripted; casting takes place without auditions
- (4) is based on living memory and present issues
- (5) holds process and product as equally important, and mutually dependent
- (6) actively promotes access and inclusivity to excluded sections of community, which impacts on production style
- (7) has a three-year structure – pilot projects, play, consolidation – which works towards long-term sustainability of projects (Beddow 2001, 12–13; original emphasis).

In 1996 acta gained the support of the National Lotteries Charities Board (NLCB) Poverty and Disadvantage scheme to produce a three-year programme of work in and across four different neighbourhoods in the Greater Bristol area, *Making A Difference* (see Beddow 2001). While Lottery funding risked reducing acta's work to the status of 'good cause' or social welfare for deprived communities, it also enabled acta to resource

several, simultaneous, large-scale projects in communities that had been requesting community play projects based on the model of work the company had honed over the best part of a decade. Beddow also planned to evaluate the social impacts of participation in community theatre to provide an evidence base to argue for increased funding to respond to community demand. This aspect of the work was, however, overtaken by the election of New Labour in 1997 and a shift in government cultural policy, again, this time drawing a close relationship between cultural participation and New Labour's agenda of tackling social exclusion, 'a term that attempted to capture a range of negative effects that went beyond just poverty or unemployment' (Levitas 2005, cited in O'Brien 2014, 68).

There have been a number of ambivalent or ambiguous effects that have flowed from the rise to prominence of cultural participation within New Labour's complicated tethering together of economic, social and cultural policy. Primary among these has been a trenchant critique of participatory practices as symptomatic of the 'instrumentalization of the cultural sphere' to serve 'broad governmental agendas' (Belfiori and Bennett 2008, 155). Criticism has, on the one hand, re-covered a notion of artistic authority and re-centred aesthetic critique (Bishop 2012) while, on the other hand, it has drawn attention to the superficial nature of participatory practice in contrast to collaborative co-production (Kester 2004). What is missing from these debates is an awareness of the fundamentally constitutive and productive role of instrumental notions of culture in cultural management practices (Gibson 2008). Without 'identify[ing] the ways in which cultures can be funded, supported or created using the public purse in ways that are democratic and accountable' (Gibson 2008, 248), Lianne Gibson argues that the field risks 'a return to the kinds of elite, exclusionary policies which have characterised cultural administration in the past' (Gibson 2008, 247). In other words, policies and practices addressing cultural inequality remain key. This awareness has been at the forefront of acta's community theatre practice since its inception, and it extends beyond access and participation to establishing a robust entitlement to collaborate in theatre as audience, as makers and, now, as workers.

While policy developments have produced ambivalent effects generally, acta adheres to its collaborative devising, community development ethos and continues to develop the company's community-engaged practice. A key change to the way acta works came in 2002 when the company acquired its own space in Bedminster, Bristol (Bristol City Council signed over a 30-year lease on a derelict building on the condition that acta renovate the building and participate in community-led development projects). Having a physical base in a local neighbourhood did not bring an end to acta's work across the Greater Bristol area. However, the move to a building with a black box theatre within its spaces necessitated a change in practice. Acta's focus shifted away from (although it did not abandon) large-scale, community-based play production to producing the work of many (20-odd), smaller groups within the centre each year. Shortly after acta acquired a dedicated theatre space, South West Arts (the relevant Regional Arts Board shortly before it was amalgamated into Arts Council England) supported Neil's attendance at the (second) International Community Theatre Festival (ICTF) in Rotterdam (Beddow 2013).<sup>3</sup> Established during Rotterdam's tenure as 'Cultural Capital of Europe' in 2001, the then biennial international festival was directed by Peter van den Hurk, co-founder (with Annelies Spliethof) of Rotterdams Wijktheater (RWT), a community-based theatre company



co-creating original theatre with, for and by under-represented residents of Rotterdam's working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods (*wijk* translates into English as neighbourhood or district). In addition to introducing acta to a global field of community-based practice, the festival initiated an ongoing partnership, critical friendship and mutual exchange between acta and RWT. Acta has been inspired by and experimented with RWT's professional performance-oriented, audience development-focused, touring model of community theatre. An aspect of acta's work now focuses on making theatre with/by a small group of experienced participants (long-term company members) to produce high quality (yet still original, relevant and affordable<sup>4</sup>) touring community theatre. Performances tour to community venues playing to audiences who do not normally go to the theatre.

Having developed this facet of acta's profile, that is, touring community theatre, the company established an integrated (triangular-shaped) system of participation termed the 'cycle of engagement'. This cyclical system consists of, first, primary projects (e.g. experiencing touring community theatre, or attending a group for the first time) aimed at a broad base offering a fun, playful and bonding experience of the creative process. Second, development projects offer ongoing opportunities for skills development in theatre making and provide support to specific or established groups to create theatre performances at the acta Centre. Third, touring community theatre is made by an experienced group of participants and tours to parts of Bristol where residents do not normally go to the theatre, thus completing the circle (Acta 2012, 7–8). It is from this basis in an awareness of the strength of the field, globally, and acta's system of community-engaged performance that the company determined to bring forward future practitioners.

## The Foundation Worker programme

Unpaid 'training opportunities' and internships are symptoms of an abusive system whose actions betray its words. As ever, they privilege those with existing capital. (Matarasso 2019)

acta's senior management team established the FW programme after Neil and Helen identified that there were few, if any, opportunities to enter into facilitating and making community theatre at a practical level. Neil notes that this was particularly the case for people from migrant or refugee backgrounds, from the working class, or from any marginalised group which was underrepresented (email correspondence). He adds that, as a secondary aim, acta was keen to develop existing work within the diverse communities of Bristol and felt that training and employing people from these underrepresented communities would enhance the company's engagement strategies and strengthen the company's inclusivity. Neil hypothesised that communities and participants new to theatre would place more trust and respect in a worker who shared and understood their own background, challenges and culture (email). Pace Matarasso's (above) rejection of unpaid internships as exploitative or unjust creative industries labour practices, which reflected their own views, acta's SMT created paid work opportunities in the manner of first jobs with training and one-to-one mentoring in the role by senior members of the acta team (Neil, Helen, Ingrid Jones and Katie Delaney).

A pilot of the FW scheme began in September 2012 with two long-term acta participants employed part-time for 1 year. Geenie Hills and Kat Bray joined acta's youth theatre and young carers' group, respectively, and moved through developmental

projects into the acta Advanced company that produces and tours quality community theatre throughout the Greater Bristol region. The pilot led to both becoming acta facilitators (see acta pages). Following the successful pilot, acta committed to writing one full-time year-long FW post into future project funding bids securing another five posts between 2012 and 2016 in this way. These ‘first job’ opportunities open to interested parties with or without degree-level education were advertised nationally. Acta appointed the following FWs to posts: Kathryn Hopkins to ‘Programme Assistant’ (2012–2013), Rosalie Pordes to Director’s Assistant (2013–2014), Aiden O’Connor to Production Assistant/Facilitator (2015–2016), Donna Thompson to Finance and Data Assistant (2016–2017) and Sara Snook to Director’s Assistant/Fundraising (2017–18).<sup>5</sup> While Rosalie, Kathryn, Donna and Sara had completed undergraduate degrees in Drama, Music, Fashion, and Drama and Spanish, respectively, Aiden was an acta participant and, at 18, had just finished secondary school. Kathryn was drawn to acta by the company’s commitment to participant process in collective creation. Rosalie applied for an FW post because she was looking for creative work and was interested in a position offering a starting wage *and* mentoring. Sara, who had, after graduating, set up her own youth theatre in Easton, Bristol, described the salaried FW post as ‘the unicorn of the creative jobs world’.

A further iteration of the acta FW programme (2016–19) was funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF), an independent grant-making foundation with a focus on young people, arts access and participation. The FW programme was incorporated into a larger three-year creative project supported by Network for Social Change, YIF and Creative Europe. As part of this project acta recruited, trained and mentored six new FWs: Tracey Harvey, Jody Cook, Maya Khatun, Aqeel Abdulla, Mohamed Hassan, and Hiba Elhindi. Tracey, Hiba and Maya were already acta participants. Jody, Aqeel and Mohammed were using, or aimed to use, theatre as a cultural resource in the working class and/or refugee communities to which they belonged. All six were employed on a half-time basis as drama workers, on the development and delivery of ‘Stories’, a range of 15 new community theatre projects with marginalised groups and young people. As well as supporting the learning of the six FWs, the programme increased the engagement of people from socio-economically and ethnically diverse communities, and delivered a programme of seminars to promote sector learning. SMT evaluation asserts that over the 3 years, 330 participants were engaged, 70% of whom could be categorised as ‘black and minority ethnic’. Twelve new plays were created and performed to 1000–1500 new audience members (who had not before been to see theatre). A key achievement capping this block of work was the international REACT festival (funded by PHF and Creative Europe) celebrating participatory theatre made with/by/for refugees and asylum seekers from Europe.

While this tranche of FW posts went to a more ethnically diverse group of people, the decision to offer opportunities to participants and (budding) practitioners from ethnic minority backgrounds was at no point led by, or influenced by, increased funding pots for particular areas of work. Rather, it stemmed from acta’s assessment that there was a lack of diversity in the community theatre workforce, as a whole, and within the company, and a desire to address this inequality in a practical way. A range of different constituencies have benefited from the FW programme including acta participants (Geenie, Kat, Aiden, Tracey, Hiba and Maya), recent arts graduates (Rosalie, Kathryn, Donna and



Sara) and community workers/activists drawing on theatre as a cultural resource (Jody, Aqeel and Mohammad). Apart from one post which specified a University degree in the job specification, the FW programme has been about offering a range of opportunities for people to enter the field. The FW employment process has, on the whole, been very open – on purpose! – to attract a wide range of people. It is always been about people's enthusiasm and desire to get into community theatre. Looking over all the Foundation posts, white, middle-class (or degree-level educated) women are in the minority and most of the posts have gone to socio-economically and ethnically diverse applicants. In the short sections that follow, participants and those new to acta explain how/why they applied for FW posts.

### **From participant to foundation worker: 'it's quite a peculiar experience being in a group and not being a participant!' (Tracey)**

Tracey describes herself as a white, working-class woman. She grew up on a council estate and lives on a Bristol estate with her family. A participant at acta since 2011, Tracey has worked on various development projects to become part of the acta Advance company responsible for producing ensemble touring productions such as *Gas Girls* (2014). In 2014, she was one of the groups that accompanied the Malcolm X Elders, a satellite group of African Caribbean elders and theatre makers, to the International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam (supported by 'Grey Matters', an EU Grundtvig programme for lifelong learning). Tracey was a member of the acta Advance group that subsequently worked with the Malcom X Elders to co-produce, *The Now*. She has long desired to work in community theatre but did not know how to get a foot in the door. In addition to being a participant, Tracey got a job in the acta bar/café, providing food/drink to neighbourhood drop ins and advocating participation in acta creative activities. At the same time, she was exploring theatre training courses although she found that the options were too expensive. She pinned her hopes on getting an FW role. Finally, one came up that matched what she wanted to do. Now in role, Tracey and Jody (see below) facilitate theatre in local communities. There is a sense, they state, of 'been there, done that, got the t-shirt'. They assert how critical it is to have facilitators from a similar socio-economic background who understand where participants come from and are at (listen to Tracey in conversation with Neil: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1051&v=gwccCvs8LDA&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1051&v=gwccCvs8LDA&feature=emb_logo)).

Hiba came to the UK seeking refuge from war in Sudan. She became a participant in acta through her children who were enrolled in a playgroup at Redcliffe Community Centre. In this group, there was mention of a drama group for adults to help with English language skills. Free childcare was available during the sessions. Hiba says she fell for the bait of free childcare and became hooked from the first session. Through participating in the creation of what became *Dream On*, Hiba felt she gained an opportunity to learn about British culture and, in addition, she valued the social life she gained through the group. The sessions were fun and brought her closer to other women from similar backgrounds at the same time offering insights into British ways of life through closeness to acta facilitators and the theatre company (seeing plays produced by other groups at the acta Centre). Hiba felt a strong sense of ownership over the play the group produced together and decided that she wanted to work with others from her community to achieve that sort of expression with all the associated social and cultural benefits it brings.

After her FW year, Hiba was employed on the EU/RAPPORT project. After the end of the RAPPORT project, Hiba plans to start a new venture working within the Sudanese community, especially with younger members, to demystify arts and theatre within the community and to produce community theatre that expresses the wealth of British/Sudanese culture in Bristol (see Hiba in conversation with Neil: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=exRjmAh-iwU&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=exRjmAh-iwU&feature=emb_logo)).

## Other/community routes

I already had lots of experience working with children running the drama sessions within my local school, but not having any formal qualification, I thought I would be unable to run drama sessions anywhere else. Then along comes acta and they offer me a year foundation, where I could work with a youth theatre and with adult groups. They would work with the skills I already had and teach me so much more, to give me the confidence to run adult groups. (Jody Cook <https://www.acta-bristol.com/acta-foundation/>)

Jody is a white, working-class woman from North Bristol, born and bred. She lives in Lockleaze with her young family. Before becoming an FW, Jody was employed as a Teaching Assistant at the local school, Stoke Park, where she also offered a drama activity as part of the after-school provision. Jody describes the drama activity she led at Stoke Park as working with kids from ‘the hood’ to adapt well-known stories (for example, *Oliver* and *Cinderella*) in local vernacular to place and issues relevant to the young people. Jody came to know about acta as Stoke Park is part of acta’s schools network. At the time Jody had no idea what community theatre was, or she had no idea she was already doing it [Jody states this after the team remind her that she ‘was doing community theatre before she knew what it was’]. On meeting Helen and Neil, Jody was full of questions: can I get a job doing this? How? Is the work paid? The responses confirmed that this was something Jody wanted to take further. She attended acta’s National Festival of Community Theatre in 2016, Festival from the Heart, and shortly thereafter applied for an FW post (hear Jody in conversation with Neil: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pO0xVV1scNA>).

Aqeel joined acta mainly because he wanted to be involved in REACT. He was first introduced to acta and participatory community theatre when he watched *Yosuf Can’t Talk* (a play by Somali group about living with children with autism and lack of knowledge/awareness of autism in Somali communities) in Cardiff, immediately grasping how valuable this type of theatre is, and the direct impact it can create for its participants, its audience, and cultural exchange in society generally. A few months later, soon after finishing his PhD in Drama, he attended the launch of REACT at the acta centre in Bristol. He knew he wanted to be involved in making theatre with refugee participants, being a refugee himself, and an active campaigner for refugee rights in the UK. He applied for an FW post related to the project and was successful. As an FW employed on the REACT project, Aqeel was given responsibility for facilitating two drama groups, with the support of Neil and Ingrid. One group presented a major learning opportunity in how difficult it can be to recruit and engage participants through to performance. In the end, Aqeel worked alongside Ingrid and partner organisation, Ashley Community Housing, with 20 participants who came to the weekly drama sessions, of whom less than half were regular. Five participants eventually performed in the play they created, *Lost Sheep*, which was performed on the opening night

of the festival. In addition to facilitating a group through to performance, Aqeel was actively involved in discussions that took place throughout the festival, which were frank and insightful discussions about the field of refugee performance. He also contributed to the final report on the festival through documentation and writing.

## Conclusion

In December 2019 acta learnt that it had been successful in its Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) bid for a 3-year 'Cornerstone' project, which will enable the company to continue the FW programme (with a further appointment in the role of Creative Production) and to support the group of six PHF FWs (2016–19) as acta Associates. As the name implies, the six former FWs will be associated with and mentored by the acta company in their own practice as individual artists as they develop, resource and deliver a set of new, community-engaged theatre projects. According to Neil, acta's pragmatic leadership as a theatre company concerned to extend cultural participation into creative work makes the most of ACE investment to enable the company to identify and secure funds for its innovative approach to sector workforce development [2013](#). These funds have come from the charitable sector – trusts and foundations – and Europe, with both REACT and RAPPORT supporting acta's work with refugee/migrant participants and FWs. Asked to comment further on the lead acta have taken in the far-reaching development of participatory community theatre and ACE's recent policy foregrounding creative participation, Neil states:

ACE's new 10-year strategy does seem to acknowledge the importance of promoting participation in the arts, and the important role that community and participatory arts organisations have historically made to achieving this aim. The challenge will be for those companies, like acta, who have this ethos and aim at the absolute core of the work, to be able to increase the funding needed to develop their practice, and the practices of FWs and acta Associates; to continue their work to make theatre represent the society it comes out of. There is the risk that this work may be trampled in the rush as larger, more well-funded organisations respond to the change in the ACE strategy. acta's approach is very much based on equality and inclusivity, and providing opportunities to all. The company believes that engaging the energy, commitment and experience of people from a wide range of different backgrounds and cultures as workers revitalises the sector, and encourages more people to engage, enjoy and have ownership of theatre. And in the process make theatre, and the arts, much, much more exciting and relevant (email correspondence).

## Notes

- 1 This paper is co-authored by the named acta staff, including former FWs, and Kerrie Schaefer, a theatre academic (Exeter University) and member of acta's Board of Trustees. Participating acta staff were self-selecting through attendance at a focus group held at the acta Centre in Bedminster on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 2019. It was agreed that the paper would be co-authored with follow up over email.
- 2 The county of Avon was a non-metropolitan county in the south-west of England between 1974 and 1996. Named after the River Avon which flows from its source in southern Gloucestershire through Bath, Bristol and into the Severn Estuary at Avonmouth, this area tends to be referred to, today, as Greater Bristol taking in parts of the South Gloucestershire,

North Somerset, and Bath and North East Somerset authorities that replaced Avon county after 1996. Even when Avon county existed the theatre company was better known by its acronym and this situation carried on after the dissolution of the county.

- 3 After 2005 and van den Hurk's retirement from RWT and ICTF, the festival shifted to triennial event and, in 2008, became known as the International Community Arts Festival (ICAF) programmed by RWT and Eugene van Erven.
- 4 Ticket prices are around £2.
- 5 Rosalie and Kathryn were employed by acta full time after the FW year. Sara has also been employed by acta after the FW year, and was recently offered a full-time role. Aiden went on to study Stage Management at RADA and has since graduated and found work with Wise Children. Donna was briefly a member of the Board of Trustees before she left to concentrate on her increasingly successful wedding business.

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## Notes on contributors

*Kerrie Schaefer* is Associate Professor in Drama at the University of Exeter. She has worked with acta since approximately 2010, most recently collaborating on an AHRC Follow on for Impact and Engagement (after an AHRC Fellowship) which featured community theatre seminars and a national festival of community theatre. Acta's work features as a case study in her forthcoming book on community performance.

*Neil Beddow* is founder and Artistic Director of acta community theatre. In addition to leading the organisation, he has facilitated the devising, writing and production of plays with people of all ages, and from all sections of the community, ranging from large-scale community plays to small local performances. He has been a champion for the work for over 35 years, and has established partnerships with many national and international companies working in the field. He has presented widely on acta's practice and philosophy, including at festivals and conferences in UK, Sweden, Netherlands, and USA. Published works include *Turning Points* (SWA 2002), and a series of local history books.

*Helen Tomlin* has been working with the Company for some 30 years, with a particular focus on diversity, inclusion and learning. The Foundation workplace learning programme, bringing new workers into community theatre from a diverse range of backgrounds, has been central to her work over the last decade. Helen is currently working as FED (Finance & Evaluation Director).

*Ingrid Jones* has worked for acta since 1993 after doing a BA in English, Drama and Education and spending time in teaching and youth work. In her role for acta she has been key to developing our youth provision and our work with migrant women. The majority of Ingrid's time is spent leading devising sessions with participants, directing and (co-) training and mentoring Foundation Workers.

## ORCID

Kerrie Schaefer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9305-7633>

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